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State Attorney General Richard Blumenthal has warned customers of Internet-based telephone services that some of the Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) companies may not directly connect 911 emergency calls to dispatchers.

In fact, some VoIP companies may not offer 911 service at all. Others may route 911 calls through administrative lines to call centers rather than directly to local 911 emergency dispatchers. Dispatchers may have more difficulty verifying the caller's address in these cases, causing response delays.

Companies such as Vonage, Verizon's "VoiceWing," Comcast, Lingo, and Dialpad promise additional features and lower rates than traditional landline telephone services.

But Blumenthal warned that some VoIP services fail to provide the same 911 emergency network access as traditional phone services.

Blumenthal urged people to find out about emergency calling features before subscribing to a VoIP service. These companies are largely unregulated by state and federal authorities, he said, and services can vary from company to company.

"When consumers dial 911, they expect live emergency dispatchers, not recorded messages," Blumenthal said. "Every second wasted routing calls could mean life or death."

Blumenthal added that his office is scrutinizing company 911 disclosures.

Blumenthal cited one instance, in which an emergency call was directed to a police department's general phone number and recorded greeting, rather than to a 911 operator. The

caller's son required immediate medical attention.

Meanwhile, newly appointed Federal Communications Commission Chairman Kevin Martin said on Tuesday that he would quickly propose a rule that Internet-based telephone providers must offer true emergency 911 services. Martin said he would send a proposal to the other three FCC commissioners so they could vote on it in May, possibly at the May 19 FCC open meeting.

Blumenthal suggested the following questions for potential VoIP customers:

- * If the service includes 911 calls
- * If 911 service is on 24 hours a day, seven days a week, or only during normal business hours
- * Is the service available automatically, or is a subscriber required to register and activate the emergency calling feature?
- * How are 911 calls connected to local emergency officials?
- * Will local emergency personnel be able to determine automatically the caller's address and telephone number or is it up to the caller?
- * Does the Internet phone service work during power failures or service outages from your broadband Internet service provider?

He declined to offer more details about his plan. Martin said since the FCC insulated the Internet phone carriers from many state regulations, the agency had an obligation to act.

Rep. Mark Kirk, an Illinois Republican who represents northern Chicago, criticized the biggest Internet telephone provider, Vonage Holdings Corp., for limited access to 911 services and urged consumers be told.

"We need a clear warning that anybody who buys a Vonage phone is going to be out of luck," Kirk said. "Is there some way the FCC can warn customers not to buy Vonage?"

Vonage denied that was case, saying that its customers who dial 911 are in fact connected to emergency response officials, though it may be to a secondary line in the call centers.

Martin said the agency should not be in the business of discouraging consumers about particular services and noted the FCC had limited authority to regulate advertising.

The Federal Trade Commission and states typically oversee truth in advertising. The Texas attorney general has sued Vonage for failing to properly warn its subscribers of the limits they would experience when trying to dial 911.

Vonage in recent weeks has reached deals with three of the four big local telephone carriers for its customers who dial 911 to be connected to the primary lines in emergency call centers.

"The marketplace is moving towards E911 access for all communications providers, but everyone's feet need to be held to the fire to ensure that nationwide rollout is completed as quickly as possible," said Chris Murray, Vonage's vice president for government affairs.